

National Novel Writing Month is Coming Up—Chris Baty Reveals the Sexy Details

Contributed by
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[Note: National Writing Month is November... next up is November, 2007. Prepare yourself!] What started out as a modest novel writing contest in 1999, amongst 21 friends who basically wanted to “brag about having written a novel at parties”, has turned into a ginormous monolith of motivation with 59,000 contestants participating in 2005-- according to it's founder Chris Baty. National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) has become so big, in fact, that they have procured non-profit status, and have a board of directors, a real office and their first full-time employee.

Maybe You Need Some NaNoWriMotivation

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Though the word “national” exists in the contest name, Baty estimates about half the contestants come from outside the US, the bulk of those hailing from Canada, Australia and the UK. As for how it went from a pocketful of friends to its current size, the growth can be blamed on livejournal, which Baty says has its own NaNoWriMo contingency, and also the power of bloggers. “It's an annual challenge for people, like a marathon—people come back every year to do this. There is definitely a repeat community,” he chuckles and adds, “Publicity is one thing we forget to do every year.” There are also volunteer municipal liaisons in over 200 cities—they hold events and write-ins at coffee shops and the ever-important thank-god-it's-over-party. In other words, you don't have to go your first draft alone and that is a highly appealing thing.

You also you get a chance to know the people in your neighborhood who are freaks like you, willing to commit to impossible projects. Baty says that he and many others have felt an enormous exhilaration at the completion of the contest. “When you get the first draft busted out and it's not horrible and there is beauty in it and there are wonderful passages, you just feel like alright! – Bring. It. On. World. What's next? After finishing 50,000 words people have a tremendous surge of creative confidence.”

Though there are no prizes, the accomplishment of pulling together with a community of writers in your city, and goshdarnit, writing 50,000 words in 30 days is a reward unto itself.

The stories of success and undoing swing wildly. On the success side, Baty relays the story of woman from South Africa fleeing an abusive relationship, stumbling upon NaNoWriMo and entering it on a whim. She loved the community it provided and completed her novel, which she really liked. “She ended up being able to read from her novel on the BBC with the encouragement of the other NaNoWriMo members,” says Baty. “For her, it was a transformative, therapeutic journey and though she moved back to South Africa, she is still in touch with that community.” It follows, of course, that

she is now the head of a NaNoWriMo group in her hometown.

Then there are, however, the stories of NaNoWriMo resulting in Marriage No More Oh, (MarNoMoOh?). Some people, Baty surmises, feel like the contest is a do or die moment, they've been sitting on the idea of writing a novel for a long time and their spouses maybe can't handle it. There are, he says, some trade-offs, like your significant other may have to be willing to do all the chores for a month in exchange for you doing them the next. "It can put the relationship to the test." But, we'll end this on the happy note that some marriages also arise out the competition as well.

Some, OK 12, of the first drafts created in the contest have been purchased by big gun publishers. These drafts, just like any other book, had to be reworked and "that takes a lot of discipline," admits Baty who is working on the 9th and final draft of the original manuscript he scribed in the first contest. Because more and more people enter each year, Baty guesses that exponentially those publishing numbers will grow. There are even those who are under contract and use the contest as part of their publishing cycle for books. "It's a great way to jumpstart their schedule for completion," says Baty, "as professional writers we get so few real deadlines. Sometimes I think NaNoWriMo is just this huge honkin' deadline for writers."

As for sticking to your writing schedule Baty recommends that you shout out to as many people as you can that have in fact joined the 50,000-word march. Make sure you ask them to check in with you because, "this will give a sense of accountability and a complete fear of looking like a loser will motivate you. That terror is really crucial," says Baty, "you can manifest this same motivational paradigm in the off-season of NaNoWriMo by getting a group of people to be your cheerleading/humiliation team." Baty makes side bets with his girlfriend all the time, he says, if he doesn't finish 10,000 words by x time then he has to do the chores he hates most, cleaning the bathroom and grocery shopping. "Productive terror is key when it comes to creative pursuits."

One of the really super sweet things about the contest is that it really doesn't matter why you want to enter it. Do you just need a creative shove? Do you, like Baty admits was his motivation for the first contest, want novel writing bragging rights? Do you need more friends in a town you just moved to? You're deal with Warner has freaked your shit out? Are you a weird person who just has to do weird things? They are all reason enough to hope on board the crazy train. "Some people never write anything outside the contest", says Baty. Oh, and not having a laptop is no excuse—NaNoWriMo has one waiting for you to check out.

TOP THREE REASONS BATY WILL KICK YOUR ASS IF YOU DON'T JOIN UP

1. Wonderful means towards book production. Having this absurd deadline, having this impossible process shoved into an impossible deadline makes the writing process easier than you would ever imagine. Takes the pressure of perfection off your shoulders and allows you to write. It's a great way to get a book written.

2. This is a great way to meet people in your area. The social component is important. There are parties, there are write-ins, shared coffee consumption—it's a fun way to meet people in your neighborhood who have the same interests.

3. A time to play. It gets adults back to a place that we don't get to very often. Most of us get so caught up in errand running, job going, child rearing and relationships that we kind of never make time for this anything goes 'make stuff' moment. Where we give ourselves time to build without tearing down, to create without editing and nitpicking and it just feels great, it feels really good. The joy of creation is something that lasts far beyond November-- it really works your imagination.

Bonus round: Novel writing is one of the great social endeavors of our time—for first drafts. This month-long process

produces prose that is just as good if not better than spending years on a draft. Making it a social event does improve your success rate and has built in accountability. Gives you people to talk to about it. It's a strange journey that you are doing with 60,000 other people. You can complain to-because complaining is a very essential part of the novel writing process.

The particulars: You can sign up for the contest starting on October 1st, or just check out what's going with Baty and his pals in your neighborhood @ www.NaNoWriMo.org. Don't forget to check out the book he wrote, *No Plot No Problem!: A Low-Stress, High-Velocity Guide to Writing a Novel in 30 Days* (Chronicle Books, 2004)!